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By Christopher Schurtz / Sun-News reporter

LAS CRUCES - A local shelter that serves victims of domestic abuse can double the number of people it helps provide temporary housing to, thanks to a recent federal stimulus award.

La Casa, which has provided programs for domestic violence in Las Cruces since 1981, will receive almost \$500,000 through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act.

The money will primarily fund and expand La Casa's transitional housing assistance program, which provides temporary housing to victims of domestic abuse who are also homeless. The program pays a deposit and up to six months rent in one of several independent housing units used by La Casa.

"It's going to expand the housing program we have now so we can serve more families," said Renee Carrasco. "We typically deal with women who usually have children. They are here because they have nowhere else to go. They've been isolated and don't have family or friends who they can turn to."

La Casa currently can provide temporary transitional housing for up to 35 families. With the new funds in place, La Casa hopes to serve as many as 100 families, said Theresa Armendariz, La Casa assistant director.

The new funds will also impact other area program providers that serve homeless families or victims of abuse, as well as increase La Casa's programs to provide financial, educational and employment services.

"It really goes beyond just housing," said Patricia McClure, La Casa resource development manager.

To qualify for temporary housing at the shelter, a person merely has to ask for help; a police report is not necessary in order to get into La Casa.

"We pretty much take people at their word. They don't have to prove they are victims before we'll help them," Armendariz said.

U.S. Rep. Harry Teague, D-N.M., toured the La Casa facility Monday afternoon, and he extolled the efforts that La Casa undertakes.

"I'm glad to see you get the extra funds for Las Cruces because I know there is a need, not just here, but everywhere," Teague told La Casa staff before the tour. "It's great that we have this service here because people need to understand they don't need to stay in a relationship that's abusive."

La Casa officials said statistics show Do-a Ana County has the second-highest rate of domestic abuse in New Mexico, a state that also ranks high nationally in reported cases of domestic abuse.

To further highlight awareness of domestic abuse, La Casa will present its 12th annual

candlelight vigil tonight, with dinner starting at 5:30 p.m.

This year, the keynote speaker will be Mildred Muhammad, the former wife of "D.C. sniper" John Muhammad, whose memoir, "Scared Silent," will be released Tuesday. Muhammad's memoir addresses her experience as a survivor of domestic abuse. The event, to be held at the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints at 2915 E. Idaho, is free and open to the public.